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JUAN RODRIGUEZ'S ROCK 'N' ROLL LIFE: PART 3 OF 7

One of a kind, one on one

YEARS ON THE ROCK BEAT blur together, but the opportunities to speak with Janis Joplin and James Brown are unforgettable

Longtime Gazette contributor Juan Rodriguez has enjoyed a vantage point on rock 'n' roll that few listeners – or even critics – have experienced. Before the music industry became a well-oiled machine, he found himself with enviable access to some of the biggest names to pass through Montreal, as well as some of the city's brightest stars. In this weekly series, he looks back at the moments that stand out in his career.

JUAN RODRIGUEZ
MUSIC

When I started reviewing, I handled everything that came to town, regardless of genre (except classical, although in a pinch I did the Bolshoi Opera and Porgy & Bess by the Houston Opera). Assignments ranged from Motörhead to Johnny Cash to Charles Aznavour to Keith Jarrett to Genesis to Robert Charlebois to James Brown to Engelbert Humperdinck to Blondie to Barry White to Nana Mouskouri to Liberace to Zappa to Dylan to Tiny Tim to Kinky Friedman to Bob Marley to Tony Bennett to Led Zeppelin. Most of it's a blur to me now, yet many moments return like it was yesterday. Those dozen years of interviews and reviews amounted to an education in the music business as it rapidly exploded.

Two early interviews, with Janis Joplin and James Brown, stood out.

An hour before Janis took the Forum stage on Nov. 4, 1968, with her new band, Full Tilt Boogie, I found myself with her in an empty hockey dressing room; it was the kind of thing you could do before rock became a well-oiled business.

Janis, wearing a pink silk minidress and white fishnet stockings, toted a sealed bottle of Southern Comfort, her trademark libation. This was my first time sipping Southern Comfort — with Janis, no less! — and it went down like candy. The first thing I noticed, apart from her frizzy dirty-blond hair and exquisite nipples poking at her dress, were the small craters from childhood acne on her face — there was something overwhelmingly real about the lady. She exuded the scent of a woman, and not just any woman: fresh herbal shampoo from her thick mane, sweat from her armpits and, perhaps from between her legs, a certain je ne sais quoi. She was all funky sensuality. Her strong-hipped body was fleshy; her ever-shifting décolleté revealing perfect melon-shaped breasts, and her legs, coyly crossed, were the stuff of dreams. Her hyped-up Texan drawl was charged with a blunt confessional tone that said, "Listen up, you better get this right — or else!"

She came on, by turns, like a boss and a girl on her first date. She told me she was impressed by Tina Turner's defiance and determination. (Turner's abuse at the hands of husband Ike was not yet widely known.) She fretted over her wild image, and said she hadn't expected the idolatry. "I'm not really impressed with all this anymore. I mean, I had a totally different conception of what it was gonna be like at the beginning. Why, I'm just a small-town girl from Texas ... I guess I must be getting cynical. There's nothing I can do about what they say.

"Say, what do you think of the Rolling Stone magazine? Hey, you know, they're all so prissy down there ... these short little grubby kids. What'd they call me? Oh yeah, 'the Judy Garland of rock.' What a dumb thing to say! As a matter of fact, she's one of the very few singers who really put themselves into the music. That's where I'm at.

GARTH PRITCHARD/MONTREAL STAR COLLECTION

James Brown (seen in Montreal circa 1977) didn't allow many people through his dressing room door, but thanks to an early write-up, Juan Rodriguez was invited backstage to "share some pain" with the singer. Pain? "Yeah, Champagne!"

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Janis Joplin was caustic and confessional by turns in a November 1969 interview, seething at a perceived slight and then quietly acknowledging her limitations.

Coming up in Juan Rodriguez's Rock 'n' Roll Life

Look for these instalments in the Culture section:

Feb. 9: On the receiving end of Leonard Cohen's love and hate; deflating Bruce Springsteen's hype; an education in authenticity at the Esquire Show Bar.

Feb. 16: A close encounter with Pink Floyd's fans; a prime seat at The Last Waltz; Paul Anka does it his way.

Feb. 23: At home chez nous; Neil Young soundtracks the critic's fade into the black.

March 2: A good cause doesn't always make for good songs; back on the wagon with the Grateful Dead; Kent Nagano provides an entry to the classical world; a return to Montreal, and to a love of popular music.

MAC ADSTER/MONTREAL STAR COLLECTION

Juan Rodriguez behind the wheel in 1972.

ROCK 'N' ROLL LIFE ONLINE

Each week, we'll be posting content on our website and mobile apps to accompany this series. Look for video interviews with Juan Rodriguez, playlists (available on the website only) related to each week's instalment, vintage photos, a forum for readers to submit their own rock 'n' roll stories, and more. You can also catch up on previous instalments. Check back often at montrealgazette.com/rocknroll

man, but they don't know it."

She planned to quit the grind, take three months off. "I bought a house in the San Francisco area, just across the bay, and there's trees and a lake and only beautiful, peaceful people live there, and I'm gonna have a lot of animals around, yeah, and a couple of ducks." She got up, did a little waddle, and seemed pleased.

But as time wound down, the bottle two-thirds drained, her mood swung dramatically. She pointed at me and scowled: "Ah, you're not going to print what's really going on, I can see that! You'll just write whatever you please. So why don't you call it quits and go away." I blushed, not knowing how to reassure her. There was an awkward silence, then I asked meekly, "Am I permitted just one more question?" She broke out into a smile and said, "Why sure, man! Go ahead!"

"Do you think you have any limitations as a performer?" I asked, addressing criticisms of her as an unrelentingly one-dimensional shrieking vocalist.

"Oh yeah," she replied in a voice that broke just like a little girl's. "I've got limitations. I mean, the second album compared to the first — there's no comparison, man. I've really come a long way. But I've got limitations as a performer ... and other sides, too."

"But that's your own business, right?"

"I'm not so sure."

She gave a spellbinding show. It was painfully obvious that the stage was the only place she felt alive and unfettered. "C'mon, take it! Take another little piece of my heart now, baby-bah!" Coming off stage, soaked in sweat, her face dropped when fans asked for autographs. "I gave everything I had on stage. Don't ask for anything more, please!" She rushed up to me with hugs and kisses, her scent now overpowering: ly of sweat, Southern Comfort and patchouli: "Send me your review. I agonize over all of 'em. Man, I'm really neurotic. I really want people to love me."

I drifted into the near-empty Star building around 3 a.m. and wrote up the interview/review slowly until 6, wanting to do right for the woman. Eleven months later, she died of a heroin overdose in a Hollywood motel apartment, alone. I cried when I heard the news.

Interviewing James Brown, Godfather of Soul, the hardest-working man in show business, was an utter thrill. I first saw him in 1964 as the penultimate act in the TAMI Show, a shindig taped in Santa Monica, Calif., and screened in cinemas soon after through the magic of Electronovision. Like the Rolling Stones, who had the sorry task of following him, I was astonished by this human package of dynamite. My first piece on him, in 1970, was titled I Have Two Selves and One Is Black, and was based on a pre-concert Forum press conference. Eschewing his unique lacquered pompadour, he sported a modest Afro, in solidarity with the black-power movement. Just two years earlier, he famously performed a televised show in Boston, urging blacks to cool it the night after Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, which sparked urban riots throughout the U.S. With blacks glued to the TV, Boston did not erupt.

"I've just released three records at once, man. But the establishment ain't gonna recognize that," he announced in his sandpaper voice. "If I have a record that sells 800,000 copies, it wouldn't even make the top 20, but one of the establishment-owned groups can sell 100,000 and be in the top 10.

"It really amuses me, it don't humiliate me, just amuses me to see a cat be so stupid, because the truth is gonna come out anyway, man. I feel a little hipper than the cat; I don't have to do it physically, 'cause I can outthink the cat and make him blow his own thing, 'cause he's gonna spend most of his time trying to keep me in a bag, but he'll be in the bag, man, trying to hold me there. Like, you look in the bag and I won't be there!"

I reported everything he said, in context, without the usual hostile, "angry black" media spin; young white-boy rock scribes tended to be intimidated by him. Mr. Brown (it was never James) evidently appreciated my coverage, for on return visits he invited me backstage after shows to "share some pain" while his hair was being re-permed. Pain? "Yeah, Champagne!" (It was a huge honour to enter through the dressing room door with the fluorescent orange sign: MR. BROWN. DO NOT ENTER.)

In 1974 I penned a long piece to preview his upcoming Place des Arts concert, which sold out quickly. To return the favour, he requested I be given an engraved watch. (I later learned he used to do this all the time in the 1960s, until he stopped because of the payola scandals.) Problem was, this was a holiday weekend and stores were closed. Mr. Brown wouldn't take no for an answer, so promotor Donald Tarlton — often infuriated yet somehow always gracious over my bum reviews of his mega-acts — dispatched his assistant Skip Stair to procure a hot Bulova (complete with a raggedly chiselled inscription). Near the beginning of his show, Mr. Brown said: "I wanna stop and say thanks to ... naw, I'll do it later." Eventually he announced my name, demanding a standing ovation. I meekly waved; my moment in the sun. (Is this a dream, or what?)

The last time I saw him, in 1978, he was playing the Limelight club on Stanley St. (then a disco magnet), doing two sets a night. "Man, you don't look so good," he observed. "You gotta take care of yourself." I was not in good shape, ground down by the stream of shows and booze. I could barely swallow some pain, which was by now down from a magnum to a split. Mr. Brown, who said he was 44 but was celebrating his 46th birthday that week, admitted he was tired: "I don't know how much longer I can do this." He mentioned how Nureyev must feel, but unlike the Russian dancer, he went "90 minutes non-stop." He was as compactly muscled as ever. "I'm trying to keep my weight down," he confided. "I got it down now; I just hope I can keep it down." His formula? "Mind power," he said, as emphatically as only Mr. Brown could.

He said he wanted to return to play the Olympic Stadium — a long way from the Limelight. "Sounds rough, but I think we can sell it out — sort of a Tribute to James Brown, with Chuck Berry and other people. We can make a film about it."

Ten years later, in the midst of IRS, drug and marital problems, a wild interstate car chase with police earned him a six-year sentence. Upon early release, he made a concerted effort to assure immortality — as if his invention of funk and the most sampled beats in hip hop weren't enough. He would set off precious bursts of energy during his live show — a monument to the power of being James Brown, now back in his glorious pompadour, for all the world to marvel.

When he died at age 73 (or 74, as the case may be) on Dec. 25, 2006, I played every one of my James Brown records — my funkiest Christmas ever, meditating on the Godfather of Soul. Thank you, Mr. Brown.

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